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A Texas man detained by ICE was his disabled son's sole caregiver. His son will be laid to rest without him

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By Nicquel Terry Ellis

Wael Tarabishi, left, died on January 23 after suffering from a lifelong inherited disorder that affected his muscles and heart. His father, Maher Tarabishi, right, is in ICE detention in Texas. *(@freemahertarabishi/Instagram)*

Maher Tarabishi's family had hoped he could be present to say his final goodbyes to his son, Wael.

Maher, Wael's primary caretaker, has been in federal detainment since October, separating him from his son as he battled severe health complications from a serious and

rare inherited disorder.

But despite the family's public pleas for Maher's temporary release, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials denied their request, his attorney said.

Now the family is preparing to bury 30-year-old Wael without Maher. The son spent his life suffering from **Pompe disease**, which leads to severe muscle weakness and heart problems.

"We are profoundly disappointed with ICE's decision to deny Maher Tarabishi the opportunity to say his final goodbye to his beloved son, Wael," Attorney Ali Elhorr said in a statement Tuesday. "Today's decision to keep him from saying goodbye is a reflection of the tragic lack of humanity by those in charge."

In a separate statement, family members said preventing Maher from burying his son "would only deepen the wounds left by the pain of these past few months."

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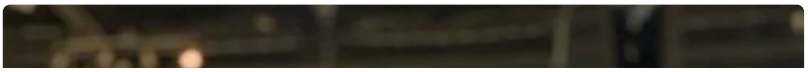
ICE's decision came three months after Maher was detained during a routine immigration check-in in Dallas. Since then, his family has **held a news conference** and publicly pleaded for federal immigration officials to temporarily release him from the Bluebonnet Detention Facility in Anson, Texas.

At first, they hoped Maher could be released to provide the 24-hour specialized care for Wael that only he was trained to do. But in Wael's last days, they were holding hope Maher could at least say goodbye to his son in person.

On Tuesday, a day before Wael's funeral was originally planned, Elhorr said he had discussed the funeral's logistics and ICE's conditions to allow Maher's attendance with immigration officials "who had shown the willingness to facilitate Maher's supervised release," but ultimately, declined to do so.



Maher Tarabishi, left, is pictured with his late son Wael Tarabishi, right. *(@freemahertarabishi/ Instagram)*

ICE detention standards allow for detainees to "maintain ties with their families through emergency staff-escorted trips into the community to visit critically ill members of the immediate family or to attend their funerals," **according to its website.**

CNN has reached out to the Department of Homeland Security for comment about the decision.

His health declined without his father's care

Shahd Arnaout, Wael's sister-in-law, told CNN the family struggled to care for Wael with his father in ICE custody.

Maher was the one who bathed Wael, changed his clothing, and helped administer food and medication through a tube, Arnaout said.

"He was the one who knew, when his fever went up, what to give him right away," Arnaout told CNN. "We had to ask multiple doctors to come and see what (medicines) to give Wael because Maher was not there to react quickly."

At a December news conference, a statement from Wael was read aloud in which he described the relationship with his father.

"He's the one who keeps me alive when I'm at my weakest," Wael said in the statement, **CNN affiliate WFAA** reported. "Without him, I am nothing. Without him, I cannot survive."

Maher Tarabishi stands behind his late son Wael Tarabishi in an undated photo provided by their family. *(@freemahertarabishi/Instagram)*

In the weeks following Maher's detention, Arnaout said Wael's health significantly declined as he developed life-threatening health complications.

He was rushed to the hospital twice: once in November with sepsis and pneumonia, and again in December with a stomach infection caused by a displaced feeding tube, his family said in a statement. He remained in the ICU at **Methodist Mansfield Medical Center** in a suburb of the Dallas-Ft. Worth metro area for the next month, the family said. He died on January 23.

In the hours before he died, Wael's wish was to see his father again. On the day he passed away, Elhorr went to meet with an ICE official to ask if Maher could come to the hospital to see his son, **the family said in a statement.** That request was denied, they said.

Tricia McLaughlin, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security, did not respond to questions about whether the family had requested his temporary release in two separate occasions and the reason why it was denied.

"It's unbelievable," Arnaout said. "Our lives have been turned upside down."

A father's journey to America

Maher arrived to the United States in 1994 from Kuwait, where he was living at the time, on a tourist visa as he fled violence, Arnaout said. Several family members were already living in the United States, she said. Maher's native country is Jordan.

For many years, he made a living as an IT engineer but stopped working in 2019 to take care of his son full-time, Arnaout said.

He was detained in October during a scheduled check-in at an ICE facility in Dallas, his family and their attorney said.

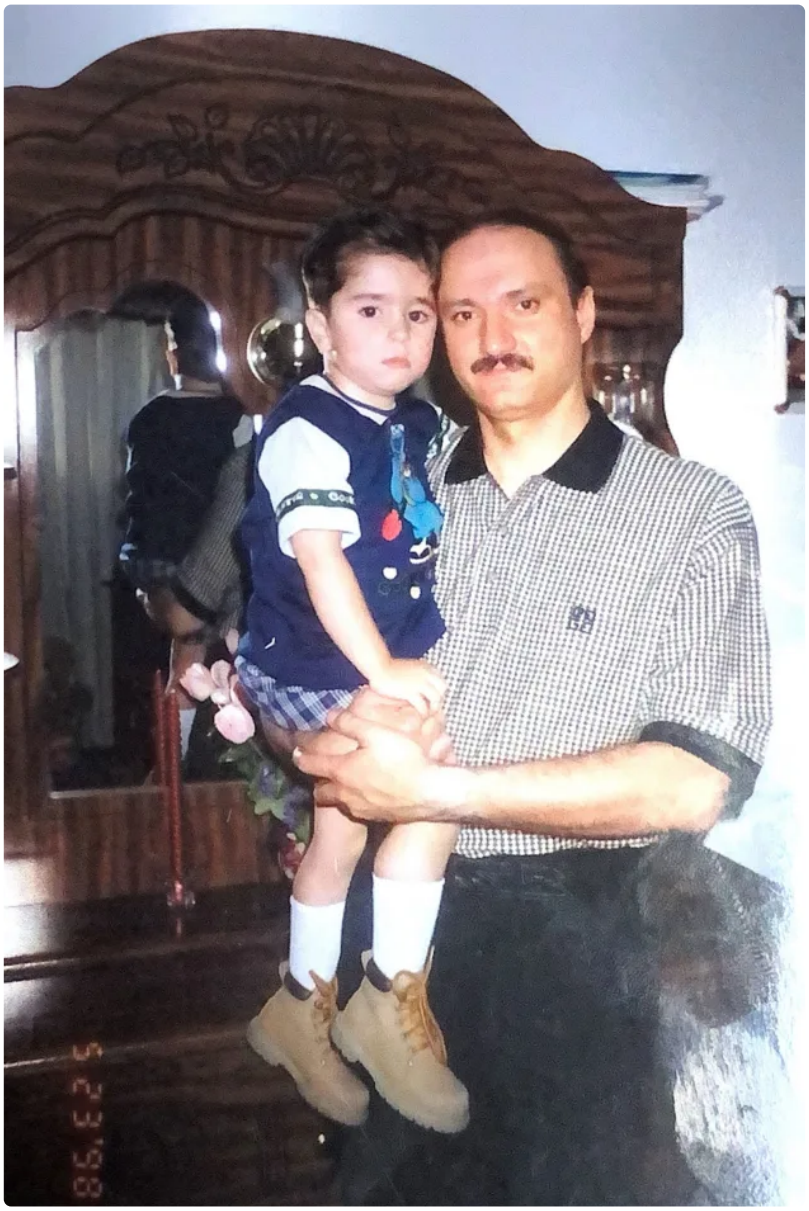
McLaughlin, the DHS spokesperson, said in a statement to CNN Maher had been allowed to remain in the US illegally for nearly 20 years despite being ordered by an immigration judge and the Board of Immigration Appeals to leave.

An immigration court ordered Maher's removal in 2006, but he was allowed to stay in the US because he was his son's caretaker and was required to attend annual check-ins with

ICE, Elhorr said. It's unclear how soon he could be deported to Jordan, Elhorr said.

Last week, Elhorr said he filed a motion to reopen Maher's case after discovering the 'attorney' who filed Maher's original asylum application was fraudulently practicing law without a license, he said.

CNN was unable to obtain documents about Maher's removal order, case dismissal and conditions outlining his stay in the US.



Maher Tarabishi, right, arrived in the United States in 1994. He was his son Wael Tarabishi's primary caregiver for his entire life. *(@freemahertarabishi/Instagram)*

In her statement, McLaughlin referred to Maher as a "self-admitted member" of the Palestine Liberation Organization, also known as PLO, a political umbrella body that has been recognized by the United Nations and the Arab League as the "sole legitimate

representative" of the Palestinian people since 1974.

In August, the Trump administration announced it was **"denying and revoking visas"** from members of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, accusing them of taking steps that "materially contributed to Hamas's refusal to release its hostages, and to the breakdown of the Gaza ceasefire talks."

Arnaout said the family denies Maher was a part of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Maher has always followed the proper guidelines to stay in the US and showed up to every required check-in with immigration authorities, Arnaout said.

The family has spoken with Maher since he's been in ICE custody, but it's challenging because they usually must wait for him to get access to a phone and call them, Arnaout said.

"He's not doing good," she said. "He wants to get out as soon as possible."

Arnaout believes the absence of Maher took a mental toll on Wael which led to his health declining.

"Mentally, he started to recognize that 'I don't feel safe anymore,'" Arnaout said about her brother-in-law. "The one person that makes me feel safe and gives me hope that I will live to the next day and makes me feel like I'm a normal person is not there anymore for me."

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